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SUBJECT: DISASTER DECLARATION - COMPLEX EMERGENCY: POLITICAL CRISIS  
AND FOOD INSECURITY IN MADAGASCAR

11. This is an Action Request. See paragraph 2 and 11.

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SUMMARY  
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12. A power struggle beginning in January 2009 that led to an unconstitutional transfer of power has resulted in a severe shock to the economy of Madagascar and a near paralysis of government capability to respond to humanitarian concerns emerging in the country. The crisis has led to over 50,000 job losses in Antananarivo alone. At the same time, unseasonably poor rainfall across Madagascar, particularly in the south, has compromised food security. The UN is preparing a flash appeal to respond to the humanitarian concerns arising from this combination of economic and climatic shocks. It is in the US interest to support humanitarian assistance in Madagascar. Given these conditions, the Chief of the US Mission exercises authority to declare that a complex humanitarian disaster is in progress and requests an immediate USD 50,000 for urgent humanitarian programming. USAID/OFDA and USAID/FFP are requested to continue to monitor the situation and support partners as determined appropriate.

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BACKGROUND  
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13. In January 2009, a power struggle broke out between the President of the Republic of Madagascar, Marc Ravalomanana, and opposition leader and former Antananarivo mayor, Andry Rajoelina. President Marc Ravalomanana handed over power to the military on March 17, 12009. Power was subsequently handed to the opposition. Weeks of opposition protests and turmoil have taken the lives of more than 150 people, and injured around 1,000.

4 As a result of the political crisis, the socio-economic situation of Madagascar has declined drastically. The crisis has severely destabilized the economy and resulted in a near halting of the 390 million USD/year tourism industry. A recent suspension of much international foreign development aid will exacerbate the plight of the nearly 70 percent of the Malagasy population living on less than 1 USD/day.

¶15. Among those particularly affected are vulnerable people living in the urban areas of several cities in Madagascar. This is manifested through increased unemployment, rising food prices, and deteriorating sanitation conditions due to limited functioning of public works and the incapacity of government to provide social services. Some church groups in the capital of Antananarivo have indicated a fourfold increase in requests for assistance, as compared to the pre-crisis period.

¶16. A preliminary assessment conducted by a group of agriculture and food security disaster actors (FAO, CRS, WFP and other local NGOs) demonstrates that over 50,000 people in the capital have lost their jobs due to lay-offs in export processing zones, closure of several private companies, suspension of income generating activities, and reduction in work force. Lack of cash to purchase food is coupled with an increase in staple food/commodities prices and localized market shortages.

¶17. In addition to direct impacts on health, nutrition, and overall food security, the crisis is taking a toll on the country's natural resource base, which is the primary source of livelihood for poor rural communities. There are increased reports of opportunistic, unsustainable and illegal depletion of natural resources due to a lack of rule of law and dysfunction of the government. Reports of potential human rights abuses inflicted by illegal operators and forest profiteers upon rural communities are also increasing, particularly in the northern forest areas. These conditions undermine livelihoods and security of poor, rural communities.

¶18. Significant rainfall shortages across the country have also contributed to growing food insecurity. The December Early Warning System (EWS) bulletin generated by BNGRC "Bureau National de la Gestion des Risques et des Catastrophes" reported that 31 communes in southern Madagascar were facing severe food insecurity due to a prolonged drought. April and May harvests are expected to fail in calendar year 2009 in Androy and Anosy regions. An estimated 150,000 people may soon be affected by food insecurity within these areas.

¶19. As the government has effectively ceased to function during the crisis, regular food security monitoring for other vulnerable populations across Madagascar has not occurred. However, preliminary assessments by USAID implementing partners, such as Adventist Development Relief Agency and CARE, indicate that affected communities are already employing significant coping strategies, including selling off livestock and household goods in order to purchase food.

¶110. The Chief of Mission has determined that the impact of the political crisis on already vulnerable populations, particularly in urban and peri-urban areas, and the food insecurity across the country, particularly in southern Madagascar, are of sufficient magnitude to warrant US Government assistance. The Chief of Mission is therefore exercising his disaster assistance authority.

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Action Required  
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¶11. Due to the political crisis, significant rainfall shortages across the country, and significant food insecurity amongst vulnerable Malagasy populations, Post hereby declares a complex humanitarian disaster in Madagascar.

¶12. Disaster assistance of USD 50,000 will be awarded to a joint group of UN agencies and NGOs to assess food insecurity in urban and rural priority districts.

¶13. This cable requests support from USAID/OFDA and USAID/FFP to work with USAID Madagascar and its implementing partners to determine the size, scope and sector of any additional emerging humanitarian assistance requirements. Post will continue to monitor and report on the situation.

MARQUARDT